

PNAP talk

Sarah Ross

For the last 10 years my work has been concerned with a spatial politics-- how space and place is shaped, who has the right to occupy place, what material and cultural devices define boundaries and borders, and I'm interested in the social struggles that articulate a kind of city or region from below, or efforts that work toward a kind of local control of space and place.

About 2 years ago I moved to Chicago and was asked if I could teach a class at Stateville Prison. I'd just moved from central Illinois where for the last 5 years I'd been teaching art history at a prison. I had worked with the University of Illinois to start a college program at a prison, I facilitated reading groups in prison and more.

So I said yes.

Stateville was built in the 1920s and has one of the last round houses in the nation-- these are buildings built on the Jeremy Bentham model and was later theorized by Michael Foucault. The prison was built for about 1000 men but holds more than 1800. People in Stateville range in age from late teens to late 60's. Many people in Stateville will die there, they are serving extraordinarily long prison terms often for crimes that had they been sentenced in a different county or 20 years before, they'd be out.

I knew that my teaching one or four or 10 classes would not be enough and I started to ask other scholars and artists if they would also teach. Together, we started with almost nothing. The prison had a building that served as evidence of an education program that was once there.

But all that was left was one lonely, ready to retire GED teacher, Ms. Coleman. We called ourselves the Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project

and negotiated with the prison to give us rooms, tables, chairs and bookcases. From there we started to collect books for a small library--

in Illinois the state cut funding for prison libraries back in 2002 and before that interlibrary loans were eliminated. So incarcerated people are really cut off from the most basic resources. Over the last year we've organized classes + workshops on a semester schedule. We don't have a credit program-- it's actually really difficult to get a university or college to take this kind of project on--- so until we can get a for credit program in place, we are at the liberty to teach what we want.

This year we have taught visual art and writing classes such as "Political Poetries", "Visual Stories", "Art of the Letter"; "Coming of Age Narratives"; and humanities classes "Intro to Feminism" "Poor People's Movements" and more.

We also organize a guest lecture series.... this idea was developed after a conversation between one of our collaborators who worked works a formerly incarcerated man who said that years ago when he was in prison there used to be people who came in and gave lectures-- and it had introduced him to new ideas.

We've hosted more than 15 guest lecturers ranging from Civil rights activist and Mississippi freedom rider Diane Nash, to the Executive Director for the center for wrongful convictions, Rob Warden, to artists like Michael Rakowitz and Laurie Palmer to formerly incarcerated people like Benny Lee.

Finally, we'll host annual exhibitions-- and our first one is scheduled for Oct.

So at the exhibition, We'll show visual work and hold readings of work that has been developed in classes. We will also host round table discussions and hold screenings around issues of mass incarceration.

I want to recognize all the people that have made this happen-- Ben Almassi, Aviva Futorian, Erica Meiners, Jill Petty, Claire Pentecost, Gabriel Villa, Fred Sasaki, Nadya Pittendrigh, Tess Landon, Daniela Olzewelka and many more people-- these folks are from a few organizations like the Poetry Foundation, John Howard Association.. and colleges and universities across the city but they volunteer their time to work on this project.

But how did all of us get out to stateville?

To get to Stateville, we drive down the I-55 fwy which is a industrial corridor. It's an *atypical* drive. Most prisons in the state were built during a boom of prison construction in the 1980s and 1990s (Illinois built 25 prison facilities in those two decades alone)

the prisons were built in far flung locations like Tamms, Vienna, Taylorville, Shawnee and other small towns across the state. Thus, our drive to Stateville is quite unique. Along the freeway is a range of industries like INtegrated INdustries Corporation, Barr Transportation

Network, CBSL Transportation Services, UPS, La Grou Distribution Services, Pierce Distribution Services, Roadlink Intermodal Logistics, APL Logistics and more. From the seat of the car we can see mega-warehouses for RR Donnelly, Home Depot, Quantam Foods, JMK Handtools, D and H Computer parts and service.

An article from Midwest Real Estate News in 2012 stated:

“Several submarkets throughout the Chicago industrial market have reported strong results...but none seem better positioned for growth than the southwest I-55 corridor. The growth of the SW I-55 corridor has been nothing short of amazing during the past 20 years...the roughly 10-mile span of I-55 ... has transformed from vast empty cornfields to roughly 60 million square feet of industrial facilities. During the hottest periods of real estate activity recorded from 1997 - 2000 and again from 2004 - 2007, nearly 45 million square feet of new space was added to this submarket..... “

This area, built over the last 25 years constitutes one of the world's largest and busiest intermodal facilities where products are transferred from barge or train to trucks for distribution. Chicagoland is the number one container handler in the Western Hemisphere with 25 intermodal facilities. Will County, the county that Stateville prison is in, is now home to the biggest intermodal facility in the region called Logistics Park Chicago. It was built with 150 million dollars of public funds and is situated in a Foreign Trade Zone which is a area outlined as juridically outside of US customs territory so it offers discounted fees and tariffs to companies. There are an estimated 150,000 workers who load and move products in these facilities they are often refered to as “Perma-Temp” meaning they are laid-off and re-hired under temporary contracts-- The companies that own the warehousing and supply chains keep labor costs low and un-unizionable through contracting with temp. agencies who hire, fire and re-hire workers.

So how did we get here???

In 1980 one of every 800 people in the U.S. was in prison or jail. In 1980 the national prison population at the time of 350,000 was declining.

Today one of every 99 people in the U.S. are in prison or jail (not including the thousands held by U.S. Marshals and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). 2.3 million people are incarcerated today.

- 70% of people in prison are people of color.

- 60% of people in prison are illiterate

- 10% are women of all races
- 2.7 million children have parents that are in prison.
- More than half of all state prisoners reported an income of less than \$2000/month prior to their arrest.
- 20,00 to 30,000 thousand people in U.S. Prisons are held in solitary confinement at any given time-- a practice that is torture.

Sex offenders are often held in confinement for decades in administrative units, after serving their sentence, with no option of parole.

In other words people in prison are black and brown, they uneducated, underemployed, they poor men and women and their families and communities often 'do time' with them.

In the 1980s and 1990s this state, Illinois-- and I'm sure your state too-- was busy building prisons and passing laws to confine people for longer and longer prison terms, while industry was busy off shoring factory labor and building intermodal networks to connect products made elsewhere to people in the region.

Between 1985 and 2010 new drug laws imposed longer or more severe sentences, and any 'good time' served in prison was eliminated meaning that there is no reduction of sentences for any rehabilitative work that people in prison do. As such, people spend much longer time in prison than they or even the state's budget offices anticipated.

In 1994, Bill Clinton signed a federal crime bill act that:

--created 60 new offense eligible for the death penalty

--funded 100,000 new police officers

--dedicated 9.7 billion for prison building and 6. 1 billion for prevention programs and

--The bill also eliminated the pell grant to people in prison. At that time there were over 700 college programs in more than 1100 state prisons. All but a handful of those programs closed. Also in 1994 Bill Clinton brokered the North America Free Trade Agreement (or NAFTA). In that decade, the US worked in partnership with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (or APEC), we negotiated the US-Jordan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the US-Vietnam bilateral trade agreement, and helped China enter the World Trade Organization.

During this same time the protection for workers and wages has decreased. As the example I stated with warehouse workers in the industrial corridor, they are unable to unionize and their average wage is 11 dollars an hour.

Finally, one other juxtaposition: during this 25 year period, more and more people are moving to cities, while the industrial corridor and prisons are built outside of the city, out of our view, off our radar.

So as a way to understand how do we get to Stateville-- I'd like to keep these two examples in mind.

When first I was asked to teach at Stateville I thought it was important work that could forge solidarities and after teaching in prison for 6 years I knew that men in prison were smart, they had keen ideas about the world around them, they acutely understood racism, violence, their own mistakes, oppression and they had something to say about it. I knew that people in prison self-educated, created informal knowledge systems among themselves in order to understand complex ideas in the face of intense repression from guards -- in other words any group of men who might get together to talk about a books or trade writing so that they could help each other learn writing skills, if caught would go to segregation. They make do with what they have with an utter lack of resources and little help from the outside. I also knew that no matter what kinds of programs or educational opportunities there were in prison, no matter how many garden projects or theatre programs existed at the end of the day prison is still a cage.

This fact is evidenced again and again as education or vocational programs and even recreational resources for incarcerated people have been eliminated by the state. So with our small group, we want to develop a project that connects scholars, artists, activists and people in prison to create a kind of exchange that could flow beyond the walls and into the public sphere. We recognize that we we must both recreate what the state has eliminated but do it with a deep knowledge of the mechanisms of control, we must do it much better with a sense of solidarity and a vision of decarceration and justice.

We must keep in view what has been designed out, what has been spatially organized off our paths and ask questions about about how we can use our institutions, our skills and knowledge to collaborate with incarcerated people, workers and other segregated groups to create new visions.